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Feed the Future Helps Tajik Women Protect their Rights to Land



USAID/LRFRP

Nodira Sidykova (left) from a Feed the Future project in Tajikistan consults with Bibirajab Boymakhmadova on the process of creating a dehkan farm.

Agriculture plays a critical role in the lives of Tajikistan's citizens. With the reorganization of collective farms in this former Soviet republic and the emergence of privately owned commercial and individual or family *dehkan* farms, agriculture remains a key economic driver in the country, employing more than two thirds of the labor force and providing a vital source of food and income for rural communities. While women in Tajikistan comprise 80 percent of the agricultural workforce, only about 12 percent head dehkan farms.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, war, labor migration and cultural norms have created an agricultural labor market that is increasingly filled by women. Yet as women become heads of dehkan farms, there is little social acceptance or government support for their emerging leadership role. A lack of access to information and legal advice has prevented women from full realization of their land rights.

That's why the U.S. Agency for International Development is funding a land reform and farm restructuring project under the Feed the Future initiative to encourage women's involvement in dehkan management and provide legal assistance to women who wish to acquire their own land. The project supports the advancement of policy and legal developments related to land rights, increasing awareness of land use rights among rural citizens, especially women. It also simplifies the registration procedure for acquisition of land-use certificates and strengthens the government's capacity to monitor and implement land reform.

Equitable access to land increases agricultural productivity, which in turn improves household food security. In Tajikistan, this link between food security and access to land is more evident when women have secured rights to land. It empowers women to invest in their land plots and farms, as well as generate income, which improves family welfare and nutritional status.

The restructuring process of dehkan farms has been most successful in northern Tajikistan, so USAID supported an in-country study tour for 24 women farmers from the impoverished southern region of Khatlon to help them exchange information and learn from farmers in the Sughd region.

One study tour participant, Bibirajab Boymakhmadova, a shareholder of a dehkan farm called *Khironbon*, had long desired to create her own dehkan farm, but was unfamiliar with the process. As a mother of six children, she was eager to learn how to increase productivity of the farm and how to protect her rights to land. Individuals in Tajikistan have the right to withdraw from a collective farm to establish private farms; however, the head of Boymakhmadova's dehkan farm never provided an opportunity for her to discuss the idea of farm restructuring or how to create a new farm.

“During the tour, I met with the women activists who run their own dehkan farms, which made me realize how important it is to know and use my land rights to be able to defend them,” Boymakhmadova says. When she returned from the study tour, she led a group of 36 women shareholders of *Khirobon* in creating their own farms.

The women went to the local USAID-supported legal aid center, where lawyers helped them complete the necessary documents and instructed them how to file petitions in court. The project’s lawyers provided legal advice and submitted the women’s ownership claims to the Regional Economic Court of Khatlon. In December 2014, a judge ruled in favor of Boymakhmadova and the other women shareholders and, as a result, 23 newly-formed family farms were legalized.

Boymakhmadova was later chosen as a *tashabuskor*, or local activist, in her village. Sharing her personal experience, she continues to assist other women in protecting and promoting their land use rights.